Synonyms of Three Levels in English and Japanese

Hiroyuki Eto（Tohoku University）

Is English easy or difficult to learn and master for students of English as a foreign language (EFL)? The answer varies, of course, depending on the situation an individual student is in. But, as a whole, compared to some other European languages, English may be easier for learners at the elementary level in that it has no complicated inflections, no intricate case systems, or no confusing grammatical genders. They do not have to memorize complex paradigms of verbs, articles, adjectives, and other inflected word forms, which learners of German or French must definitely learn by heart. Thanks to such simplicity of grammar of English, EFL students may soon reach a certain level for a basic communication by using simple sentences within a restricted range of vocabulary around 1,000 words.

For intermediate and advanced EFL students, however, this may not be true. For them, English is becoming harder and harder. In other words, the more they learn English, the more difficult it becomes. What makes English more difficult for intermediate and advanced learners is its vocabulary, particularly its rich synonyms. It is quite a challenge for EFL students at these levels, who lack native intuition of the language, to choose a proper word in a certain collocation, to find the accurate wording and cultivated diction in a certain context, and to translate a subtle difference in nuance of synonymous words.

The English language may be characterized by its richness in synonyms, which results largely from the mingling of native words and foreign loan words. Such loan words in English, particularly those derived from Latin and Greek, seem to have the “undemocratic” character (Jespersen, 1982, p.133), because many of them cannot always be used or understood by people without classical education. In everyday conversation people often tend to use easier, or more “democratic,” words such as *sleeplessness, eye doctors, personification*, while in more formal settings educated people may use harder, or undemocratic, words such as *insomnia, ophthalmologists, anthropomorphism,* respectively. Small children may guess what *sleeplessness* means, because they know each component of this word—*sleep*, *less,* and *ness*. But even adults cannot tell the meaning of *insomnia* unless they have learned it at school. Etymological knowledge may help guess what this word means, but only learned people may have an idea of Latin or Greek roots.

It is useful and practical to divide English vocabulary into two categories: native words and loan words. But it is more precise and instructive if it is categorized into three types—native elements, French, and Latin. According to Baugh and Cable (2013, p.182), English has synonyms at three levels—popular, literary, and learned. The difference in nuance or tone between these three levels is often obvious as seen in the following sets: *rise—mount—ascend, ask—question—interrogate, goodness—virtue—probity*, etc. In each of these sets, the first words are indigenous English, the second is from French, and the third from Latin.

In Japanese, the same phenomenon can be observed. The words in the formal, or undemocratic, group are made up with Chinese characters, or *kanji* (漢字); those in the popular, or democratic, group are

composed by Japanese native words even if Chinese characters are used as a component. More precisely, the expressions *nemurenai koto* (眠れないこと), *meisya* (目医者) or *menoisya* (目の医者), and *hitoni niseru koto* (人に似せること) can be regarded as paraphrased expressions of *fuminshō* (不眠症), *gankai* (眼科医), and "*gijinhō* (擬人法)" using pure native Japanese words, or *yamatokotoba* (やまとことば [大和言葉]). As in the case of English, the words in the popular group are perfectly understandable by native Japanese speakers but recognized as rather immature childish expressions, and those in *kanji* sound more formal and are more difficult to understand without learning them at school.

In addition to *yamatokotoba* and *kango*, loan words of Chinese origin, the Japanese vocabulary contains a large number of *seiyogo* (西洋語), or Western loan words. These three groups of words constitute synonyms at three levels in present-day Japanese (Watanabe, 1983, p.213ff.). In the following combinations, *miyabiyaka*(みやびやか)—*yuga*(優雅)—*ereganto*(エレガント), *magokoro*(まごころ)—*seii*(誠意)—*sinseriti*(シンセリティー), *kizukau*(きづかう)—*tyuuisuru*(注意する)—*keasuru*(ケアする), the difference in nuance between these three groups is also apparent. The first elements are native Japanese. The second is from Chinese and the third from English. Pure native Japanese words, *yamatokotoba*, can be characterized as "popular" like native elements in English, and Chinese loan words, *kango*, are generally more "literary" and "bookish." Western loan words, *seiyōgo*, create a "fashionable" and "cool" impression.

For most of the Japanese, historically speaking, foreign goods and ideas from Western countries, called *hakuraihin* (舶来品), have been thought of as expensive, valuable, treasurable, and thus they are felt to be fashionable and cool stuff. Words borrowed along with these goods and ideas thus are of the same effect. As in the case of English, *yamatokotoba*—words in the native elements group—are generally characterized as "popular" among Japanese people. *Kango*—those in the Chinese group—are counted as "literary" and "bookish" words that must be learned at school. Those in the *seiyōgo* category may be still foreign to a sizable number of Japanese people.

In this presentation I try to (1) examine synonyms at three levels in English and Japanese with a consideration of historical, cultural, and social elements that brought about this phenomenon and (2) refer to the difficulty in translation of the subtle nuance in synonyms.

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Synonyms of Three Levels in English and Japanese*

Hiroyuki Eto（Tohoku University）

1. Introduction

Is English easy or difficult? To put it more precisely, is it easy or difficult for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) to learn and master English? The answer varies, of course, depending on the situation an individual student is in. But, in my opinion, English is not so difficult a language to learn, particularly, for beginners.

Compared to some other European languages, English may be easier for learners at the elementary level in that it has no complicated inflections, no intricate case systems, or no grammatical genders. I still clearly remember that a learned British Jesuit priest's saying that native English speakers do not have to learn grammar any longer. By grammar he may have meant inflections and conjugations, comparing it with those of Latin and Greek.

To take German as an example, learners must memorize complex paradigms of verbs, articles, adjectives, and other inflected word forms. In the case of the definite article, for instance, German has sixteen different forms such as *der, des, dem, den*, etc., while English has only one: *the*. In order to choose a correct form of the article in German, they also have to learn by heart the gender of each noun (i.e., masculine, feminine, or neuter) and understand the case system of the German nouns (i.e., nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative).

In learning English, no such demanding and grueling tasks are not required for learners in the first stage. Using simple sentences within a restricted range of vocabulary around 1,000 words, EFL students may soon reach a certain level for a basic communication, which may be one of the reasons why English has become a dominant language of international discourse.

For the intermediate and advanced EFL students, this may not be true. For them, English is becoming harder and harder. In other words, the more they have learned English, the more difficult it becomes. What makes English more difficult for advanced learners is its vocabulary, particularly its rich synonyms. It is quite a challenge for EFL students, who lack native intuition of the language, to choose a proper word in a certain collocation, to find the accurate wording and cultivated diction in a certain context, and to translate a subtle difference in nuance of synonymous words.

In this article I try to (1) examine synonyms at three levels in English and Japanese with a consideration of historical, cultural, and social elements that brought about this phenomenon and (2) refer to the difficulty in translation of the subtle nuance in synonyms.

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2. Synonyms at Three Levels in English

2.1 "Undemocratic" Character of English

In his *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Otto Jespersen described the difficulty of loan words in English derived from Latin and Greek and indicated "the undemocratic character which is a natural outcome of their difficulty" (1982, p.133). Many of the hard loan words, sometimes called "big" words or "ink-horn" terms (McKnight, 1928, p.107), cannot always be used or understood by people without classical education.

In everyday conversation, people often tend to use easier, or more "democratic," words such as *sleeplessness, eye doctors, personification*, while in more formal settings educated people may use harder, or "undemocratic," words such as *insomnia, ophthalmologists, anthropomorphism,* respectively.[1] Small children may be able to guess what *sleeplessness* means, because they know each component of this word—*sleep*, *less,* and *ness*. But even adults cannot tell the meaning of *insomnia* unless they have learned it at school. Etymological knowledge may help guess what this word means, but only learned people may have an idea of Latin or Greek roots.

Table 1. "Democratic" vs. "undemocratic" use of words in English

"democratic"	"undemocratic"
sleeplessness	insomnia < (Latin) in- [not] + somnus [sleep]
eye doctor	ophthalmologist < (Greek) ophthalmo- [eye] + logy [science] + ist
personification	anthropomorphism < (Greek) anthropo- [man] + morph [form] + ism

Jespersen (1982, pp.137-138) also illustrated this undemocratic character of English by juxtaposing easy, or democratic, sentences and more complicated ones as follows:

Table 2. "Democratic" vs. "undemocratic" use of sentences in English

"democratic"	"undemocratic"
A rolling stone gathers no moss.	Cryptogamous concretion never grows on mineral fragments that decline repose.
A great crowd came to see.	A vast concourse was assembled to witness.
Great fire.	Disastrous conflagration.
The fire spread.	The conflagration extended its devastating career.
Man fell.	Individual was precipitated.
Sent for the doctor.	Called into requisition the services of the family physician.
Began his answer.	Commenced his rejoinder.
He died.	He deceased. / He passed out of existence. / His spirit quitted its earthly habitation, winged its way to eternity, shook off its burden, etc.

[1] After my presentation on this topic at the aforementioned seminar, an EFL teacher presented in the venue pointed out an interesting fact that for EFL students whose mother tongue belongs to Romance language such "undemocratic" words are easier to understand compared to "democratic" English native words.

In any language an easy expression can be paraphrased into a more complicated one, and vice versa. But this phenomenon seems to be peculiar in English. In Jespersen's words, "I do not deny that somewhat parallel instances of stilted language might be culled from the daily press of most other nations, but nowhere else are they found in such plenty as in English, and no other language lends itself by its very structure to such vile stylistic tricks as English does" (p.138). The loan words adopted from Latin and Greek increased synonyms in English and, as a consequence, greatly enriched the language and the worldview of the English speaking people, but, at the same time, they made the English language all the more difficult for its richness in synonyms.

2.2 Synonyms at Three Levels in English and the Differences in Nuance

Numerus synonyms in English not only enrich the language, but also provide an interesting material for storytellers. In the first chapter of *Ivanhoe* (1820), Sir Walter Scott describes an amusing conversation contrasting an indigenous element (i.e., swine) with a loan word from French (i.e., pork):

> "And swine is good Saxon," said the Jester; "but how call you the sow when she is flayed, and drawn, and quartered, and hung up by the heels, like a traitor?" "Pork," answered the swineherd. "I am very glad every fool knows that too," said Wamba, "and pork, I think, is good Norman-French; and so when the brute lives, and is in the charge of a Saxon slave, she goes by her Saxon name; but becomes a Norman, and is called pork when she is carried to the Castle-hall to feast among the nobles; what dost thou think of this, friend Gurth, ha?"

The setting of this story goes back to 12th-century England, shortly after the Norman conquest of 1066, when the French speaking aristocracy ruled over the English speaking peasants. The rulers enjoyed "pork" in a dining room, and the ruled took care of "pigs" in farms and fields for their lords. This is why English distinguishes the names of certain farm animals, *ox, pig, sheep*, from their food names *beef, pork, mutton*. This passage may be difficult to translate into French or German, because in those languages there is no distinction between farm names and food names of such animals.

In Act 5, Scene 1 (ll. 45-52) of *As You Like It* (ca. 1600), William Shakespeare makes a play on words in the following manner:

> Therefore, you clown, *abandon*,—which is in the vulgar *leave*,—the *society*,—which in the boorish is *company*,—of this *female*,—which in the common is *women*; which together is, *abandon* the *society* of this *female*, or clown, thou *perishest*; or, to thy better understanding, *diest*; or to wit, I *kill thee, make thee away*, translate *thy life into death*, ... (italics mine)

In this passage Shakespeare plays with synonymous words by putting a loan word first and replacing it with its native equivalent: *abandon —leave, society —company, female —women*, etc. This may make readers amused if they recognize the subtle difference in nuance between them. The native words quoted here are characterized by Shakespeare with such words as "vulgar," "boorish," and "common." From this it follows that the loan words sound refined and sophisticated. It is possible, but still difficult, to

translate this passage into other languages without expressing skillfully this difference in nuance.

In order to grasp the vocabulary structure of the English language, it is useful and practical to divide English vocabulary into two categories: native words and loan words. But it is more precise and instructive if it is categorized into three types—native elements, French, and Latin—following Baugh and Cable (2013) who indicate that "the richness of English in synonyms is largely due to the happy mingling of Latin, French, and native elements" (p.182).

If we present only two categories in English vocabulary, we may boldly be able to conclude that native elements, being generally short and simple, are therefore strong and direct; loan words are conceived as learned and elegant but less direct. But this is not always the case in the history of the English language.

> The Latinized diction of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers brought up in the tradition of the classics provoked a reaction in which the "Saxon" element of the language was glorified as the strong, simple, and direct component in contrast with the many abstract and literary words derived from Latin and French. It is easy to select pairs like *deed—exploit, spell—enchantment, take—apprehend, weariness—lassitude* and on the basis of such examples make generalization about the superior directness, the homely force and concreteness of the Old English words. But such contrasts ignore the many hundreds words from French that are equally simple and as capable of conveying a vivid image, idea, or emotion—nouns like *bar, beak, cell, cry, fool*, . . . or adjective such as *calm, clear, cruel, eager*, ... (Baugh and Cable, 2013, pp.181-182)

As pointed out here, many of the vivid and forceful English words are French origin. Though the French and Latin loan words are often regarded as literary and learned, those words play a very important role in English vocabulary. "Language has need for the simple, the polished, and even the recondite word" (Baugh and Cable, 2013 p.182). This is why Baugh and Cable phrase the "happy" mingling of the three elements. The difference between synonyms at three levels is apparent in the following contrast:

Table 3. Synonyms at three levels in English

Native elements (English) "popular"	**French** "literary"	**Latin** "learned"
rise	mount	ascend
ask	question	interrogate
goodness	virtue	probity
fast	firm	secure
fire	flame	conflagration
fear	terror	trepidation
holy	sacred	consecrated
time	age	epoch

As an EFL teacher in Japan, I regard the words in the Latin group as big words compared to the easier words in the native elements and the French groups. In this sense, I agree with Baugh and Cable's judgment that "the difference in tone between the English and the French words is often slight; the Latin word is generally more bookish" (2013, p.182). The words in the native elements group, which are characterized as "popular," must be learned among junior high school students in Japan as "easy" and "basic" words. Those in the French group counted as "literary" are still must words for senior high and college students in Japan. But, perhaps, those in the Latin category entitled "learned" need not to be known to most EFL learners in Japan, simply because they are not constantly used in everyday life.

3. Synonyms at Three Levels in Japanese

I mentioned earlier the contrastive tone between *sleeplessness, eye doctors, personification* and *insomnia, ophthalmologists, anthropomorphism*. In Japanese, too, it is possible to observe the same phenomenon in the construction of its vocabulary. Japanese has the following contrastive combination in synonyms:

Table 4. "Popular" vs. "formal" use of words in Japanese

"popular (democratic)"	"formal (undemocratic)"
nemurenai koto (眠れないこと)	fuminshō (不眠症)
meisya or menoisya (目医者、目の医者)	gankai (眼科医)
hitoni niseru koto (人に似せること)	gijinhō (擬人法)

The words in the formal group, or "undemocratic" in Jespersen's term, are made up with Chinese characters, or *kanji* (漢字); those in the popular, or "democratic", group are composed by Japanese native words even if Chinese characters are used as a component. More precisely, the expressions *nemurenai koto* (眠れないこと), *meisya* (目医者) or *menoisya* (目の医者), and *hitoni niseru koto* (人に似せること) can be regarded as paraphrased expressions of *fuminshō* (不眠症), *gankai* (眼科医), and "*gijinhō* (擬人法)" using pure native Japanese words, or *yamatokotoba* (やまとことば [大和言葉]). As in the case of English, the words in the popular group are perfectly understandable by native Japanese speakers but recognized as rather immature childish expressions, and those in *kanji* sound more formal and are more difficult to understand without learning them at school.

3.1. *On-yomi* vs. *Kun-yomi*

For some historical reasons, most of the Chinese loan words, or *kango* (漢語), used in Japanese have a variety of pronunciations. Even a two-character compound word sometimes has two different ways of reading: *on-yomi* (音読み) and *kun-yomi* (訓読み). In *on-yomi,* roughly translated into "sound reading," the *kanji* are thought of reading in an original way, even though the readings do not match the present-day Chinese pronunciation. On the other hand, *kun-yomi* is the Japanese way of reading *kanji.*

The word 草原, for example, has two different ways of reading: *sōgen* (*on-yomi*) and *kusahara* or *kusappara* (*kun-yomi*). Basically both readings represent almost the same meaning, an area of ground covered with wild grass, but project different images. When Japanese pronounce it as *sōgen*, many of us

may visualize an expansive grass field or a great prairie, where we could see horses or zebras running at a great distance. In contrast, *kusahara* has the image of a rather small grass-covered open space in a backyard or on a bank of a river, where we might find crickets or grasshoppers.

Figure 1. Different images by different ways of reading (1)

Sogen

Kusahara

Another example is 市場, whose *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* are *shijō* and *ichiba* respectively. *Shijō* reminds us of a large-scale market where professional business persons buy and sell particular commodity and products. *Ichiba* also represents a market, but it is a rather small open area or building where we will shop daily foods and necessities and family groceries. *Ichiba* is more familiar and closer to our daily life. So the word 株式市場, which means the *stock market,* should be read as *kabushiki-shijo*, not as *kabushiki-ichiba*, because this market is not so familiar to every person or close to our daily living.

Figure 2. Different images by different ways of reading (2)

Shijo

Ichiba

From the explanation above, it comes to the conclusion that *on-yomi,* close to the original Chinese pronunciation, makes us visualize something formal, full scale, and far removed from our daily life, and that *kun-yomi*, the native Japanese way of reading, signifies something popular, familiar, and close to our daily living.

3.2. Western Influence and Synonyms at Three Levels in Japanese

In addition to *yamatokotoba* and *kango*, loan words of Chinese origin, the Japanese vocabulary contains a large number of *seiyogo* (西洋語), or Western loan words. These three groups of words constitute synonyms at three levels in present-day Japanese (Watanabe, 1983, p.213ff.; Ito and Mester, 2003, p.38ff.; Hotta, 2016, pp.114-117;).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Japan opened the country to become a modern industrialized country, it eagerly learned not only science and technology, but also social systems and practices from Europa. With this trend, many European languages—English, German, and French in particular—became familiar to intellectuals for practical reasons of learning various fields of disciplines. At the beginning, many of the European loan words were translated into Japanese in the form of compound words using two Chinese characters: *society* into *syakai* (社会), *philosophy* into *tetsugaku* (哲学) , *nature* into *shizen* (自然), etc.

Since the end of the World War II, however, many Western loan words in Japanese, mostly from English (Takashi, 1992), have not been translated into Japanese, but *katakana* (カタカナ) has been used to transcribe the sound of these loan words into Japanese such as *ereganto* (エレガント) for elegant, *shinseritī* (シンセリティ) for sincerity, *derikashī* (デリカシー) for delicacy, *kea* (ケア) for care, *konpuraiansu* (コンプライアンス) for compliance, etc.

Table 5. Synonyms at three levels in Japanese

Yamatokotoba **Pure native Japanese words** “popular”	***Kango*** **Chinese loan words** “literary/bookish”	***Seiyōgo*** **Western (English) loan words** “fashionable/cool/learned/pedantic ”
miyabiyaka (みやびやか)	*yūga* (優雅)	*ereganto* < elegant (エレガント)
magokoro (まごころ)	*seii* (誠意)	*shinseritī* < sincerity (シンセリティ)
omoiyari (おもいやり)	*hairyo* (配慮)	*derikasī* < delicacy (デリカシー)
kizukai (きづかい)	*chūi* (注意)	*kea* < care (ケア)
mamorukoto (まもること)	*zyunshu* (遵守)	*konpuraiansu* < compliance (コンプライアンス)

Pure native Japanese words, *yamatokotoba*, can be characterized as “popular” like native elements in English, and Chinese loan words, *kango*, are generally accepted as more “literary” and “bookish.” In a formal writing style, *kango* are more likely to be used than *yamatokotoba,* but both types of words are commonly used in daily conversations. Strictly speaking, *kango* are loan words from ancient Chinese, but most Japanese people regard these words not as loan words but as part of Japanese, because they have been so assimilated in the Japanese language in its long history. As the words of French origin in English are vivid and forceful, so are the words of Chinese origin in Japanese.

On the other hand, Western loan words, *seiyōgo*, have a different nuance from *yamatokotoba* and *kango*. First, they create a "fashionable" and "cool" impression. For most of the Japanese, historically speaking, foreign goods and ideas from Western countries, called *hakuraihin* (舶来品), have been thought of as expensive, valuable, treasurable, and thus they are felt to be fashionable and cool stuff. Words borrowed along with these goods and ideas thus are of the same effect.

In present-day Japanese, so many English words are used for advertisement that foreign visitors to Japan will be amazed and amused (Crystal, 1997). A rather small flat or an apartment house is called *apāto* (アパート), which stems from the English word *apartment house*, while a condominium, however small it is, is called *manshon* (マンション), which originates from English *mansion*. But a Japanese *manshon* signifies just a building or complex containing a number of individually owned flats and is, therefore, totally different from a mansion in English. So the sentence *karewa manshon wo katta* (彼はマンションを買った) in Japanese, which can be literally translated into *he bought a mansion*, may give misleading information to English native speakers because he did not buy a large stately residence, but just a flat.

Since the 1960s, the word *manshon* has been very popular. This term is often used as a name of a condominium such as "Park *Manshon* (パークマンション)" or "River Side *Manshon* (リバーサイドマンション)" because it echoes expensive, prestigious, luxurious, etc. But, as it is getting too widespread and sounds well worn, it is often replaced by other foreign terms of European origin such as *mezon* (メゾン ＜French *maison*), *kāsa* (カーサ ＜Spanish *casa*), *haimu* (ハイム ＜German *Heim*), etc.

In addition to being fashionable and cool, Western loan words sound "learned," "academic," and sometimes "pedantic." Most Japanese know words categorized in *yamatokotoba* (e.g., *magokoro* まごころ) and in *kango* (e.g., *seii* 誠意) at Table 5, but sometimes have difficulty in understanding and using *seiyōgo* (e.g., *shinseritī* シンセリティ). Still, a few Japanese people prefer to use such *seiyōgo* as *kea* (ケア) and *konpuraiansu* (コンプライアンス) instead of using easier equivalents in *yamatokotoba* or in *kango*. Those people may use these words in order to express a subtle nuance conveyed by such words. They may show off their knowledge of such "big" foreign loan words or of their English proficiency, in which case these *seiyōgo* play a role as jargons.

As in the case of English, *yamatokotoba*—words in the native elements group—are characterized as "popular" among Japanese people. *Kango*—those in the Chinese group—are counted as "literary" and "bookish" words that must be learned at school and used in formal writing. Those in the *seiyōgo* category may be still foreign to a sizable number of Japanese people.

4. Concluding Remarks

In foreign language learning, translation plays an important role. It is very helpful in order to check on the accuracy of our understanding of a sentence in a foreign language. But it is sometimes misleading when it comes to translating a subtle nuance of a word. As indicated above, it should be better to translate an "eye doctor" into "*meisya* (目医者)" and an "ophthalmologist" into "*gankai* (眼科医)", vice versa, in order to precisely connote the degree of familiarity of each word.

The *domestication* and *foreignization* strategies in translation practice deal with "the question of how much a translation assimilates a foreign text to the translating language and culture, and how much it

rather signals the differences of that text" (Munday, 2001, p.147). These two strategies help us realize how subtly different the target language is from our mother tongue in various cognitive aspects (Venuti, 1995, 1998). However small this difference may be, it is significant to make us realize difference in nuance between words of source and target languages.

Domestication is the strategy of "writing a target text which sounds like a 'native' text and losing some of the features of the source language and culture," and foreignization is described as the strategy of "writing a text which keeps these features [of the source language and culture] to a lesser or greater extent but sound a bit (or more than a bit) foreign to the reader" (Gile, 2009, p.252). When we translate an "eye doctor" into "*meisya*" and an "ophthalmologist" into "*gankai,*" we may employ not only the domestication strategy in that the translated words sound natural in the target language (i.e., Japanese), but also the foreignization strategy because they keep the "democratic" and "undemocratic" features of the source language (i.e., English).

Distinction between synonymous words in their nuance is difficult, but it may enable learners to understand the in-depth meaning and usage of a particular word and translate it into a target language with high precision. As a result, it may bring learners to upper levels in foreign language learning.

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